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ABSTRACT

This report outlines a meeting of experts held in connection with a project to implement a European units/credits system for modern language learning by adults. The group's aims were: (1) to discuss the second phase of research--operational specification of adult language learning objectives--and in particular to give further guidance and briefing for the full-time research to be carried out in 1973; (2) to give preliminary consideration to later stages of the research and development program; and (3) to examine provisional results in the gathering of information relevant to the development of the units/credits system (replies to the questionnaire sent to national rapporteurs of the St. Wolfgang Symposium and replies to the questionnaire on needs and motivations of adults learning a foreign language tested in the framework of the Eurocentres). The conclusions reached as a result of this meeting are detailed in the report. (Author)

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COMMITTEE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL EDUCATION
AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Meeting of experts

on

"A European units/credits system
for modern language learning by adults"

(Strasbourg, 23 - 24 January 1973)

REPORT

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A. AIMS

The experts (see list of participants in Appendix I) met in Strasbourg on 23 and 24 January under the chairmanship of Professor Trim in order:

1. to discuss the second phase of research: operational specification of adult language learning objectives, in particular to give further guidance and briefing for the full-time research to be carried out in 1973;

2. to give preliminary consideration to later stages of the research and development programme;

3. to examine provisional results in the gathering of information relevant to the development of the units/credits system ((i) replies to the questionnaire sent to national rapporteurs of the St. Wolfgang Symposium; (ii) replies to the questionnaire on needs and motivations of adults learning a foreign language tested in the framework of the Eurocentres).

In accordance with the decision taken at the meeting of September last a preliminary restricted meeting was held on 22 January 1973 to examine the possibility of combining the linguistic and situational approaches of the studies by Dr. van Ek and Professor Wilkins, and to recommend some lines of guidance for the full-time research.

B. CONCLUSIONS

1. The group noted that there were no fundamental mutual contradictions between Dr. van Ek's and Professor Wilkins' papers; the two papers together should form an adequate basis for investigating further the feasibility of the units/credits system.

2. The Secretariat informed the group that Dr. Bung had accepted to carry out, under contract, full-time research in accordance with the directions of the group of experts and, in particular,

(i) to prepare a model for the operational specification of adult language learning objectives in terms of communication situations, taking into consideration the situational, notional and linguistic criteria developed in the following reports:

- "A model for the definition of adult language needs" (doc. CCC/EES (72) 49);

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- "The linguistic and situational content of the common core in a unit/credit system" (doc. CCC/EES (72) 67);

- "Proposal for a definition of a threshold level in foreign language learning by adults" (doc. CCC/EES (72) 72);

(ii) to exemplify this model by detailed specification of the content of the threshold level of competence in English.

Dr. Bung will keep in close and regular touch, throughout his period of appointment, with members of the group of experts, in particular with Professor Trim (Project Director) and Professor Wilkins.

An interim report on the progress of work will be examined by the group at its next meeting (April 1973). A completed report of the research undertaken will be submitted to the Secretariat at the end of June.

On the basis of the preliminary discussion the group formulated some general principles within which Dr. Bung should conduct research; in particular, the group agreed:

(a) that the units/credits scheme should be conceived in the spirit of the issues described in doc. CCC/EES (72) 60 namely,

(i) how to increase motivations for language learning by adults and how to optimise provisions in language learning to meet the diversified (social and vocational) needs of adult learners?

(ii) how to break down the global concept of language into units and sub-units based on an analysis of particular groups of adult learners, in terms of the communication situations in which they are characteristically involved?

(iii) how to develop a units/credits scheme compatible with a multi-media approach (application of educational technology)?

(iv) how to develop within such a system appropriate inbuilt forms of evaluation enabling adult learners to build up a study profile appropriate to their individual needs?

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(b) that the approach should recognise a number of levels in terms of terminal behaviour with regard to structural and functional aspects of the linguistic system which the learner must internalise. These levels will govern the scope of units. That is to say, each unit will be contained within two successive competence levels;

(c) that at any particular level, separate units will be developed to correspond to distinct examinable activities. Each activity distinguished should constitute a set of socially useful language operations;

(d) that the content of the units should then be defined in terms of sub-activities, especially with reference to the behaviour potential involved in the specified linguistic operations;

(e) that the combination of modules into units/credits (unité capitalisables) should provide "profiles" in terms of those modules taken and grades obtained. The aim will be to combine freedom of choice with a feasible examination structure; accordingly, there will not necessarily be any fixed pass-fail boundary; instead, different profile types may be given recognition for different purposes in the light of different types of learners and their needs. Premature specialisation will not, however, be encouraged;

(f) that in breaking down the global specification of the threshold level in modular form care should be taken to leave as much freedom as possible for individual learning strategies.

(See also in Appendix II the note prepared by Dr. Bung)

3. The group foresaw the further development of the units/credits system as taking three main directions:

- the central development would be the conversion of the operational specifications of language learning objectives into an outline learning system in consultation with the Steering Group on Educational Technology; in particular, a detailed scheme would be developed for English at threshold level as an exemplification of the overall system. It was expected that the system would be extended later to other languages (e.g. French and German). Contacts would then be established with course designers in a range of European languages.

- a continuing programme for the collection and updating of information on adult language use, needs and motivations, relevant to the development of the units/credits system.

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- an enquiry into the structure and content of existing European modern language qualifications available to adults. This enquiry would serve as the basis for a taxonomy of language learning objectives at different levels, and would be of assistance to member governments in establishing a system of equivalence leading to the mutual recognition of language qualifications.

In view of the need to move ahead quickly and in order to avoid that the work of the group be overtaken by developments in the field, the above-mentioned operations should, if possible, be carried out simultaneously. It was recognised that in order to do so, members of the group should undertake more specialised responsibility together with additional experts co-opted from outside groups, whilst maintaining the integrity of the overall project, and that increased financial provision would undoubtedly be necessary after the St. Wolfgang Symposium.

As the forward planning of media production is usually established two or three years in advance, it is necessary to establish contacts with those responsible for relevant pilot projects and potential producers in the near future in order to maintain the proposed timetable of pilot projects (cf. doc. CCC/EES (72) 60, pages 8 - 11). It was agreed to bring this matter before the first joint meeting with members of the Steering Group on Educational Technology.

4. The Chairman made a preliminary report on the replies to the questionnaire sent to the national rapporteurs at the St. Wolfgang Symposium. Replies have now been received from the majority of member countries. It appeared that the information available on adult language learning was in many cases very slight: a number of national rapporteurs, however, had expressed an interest in developing the collection of such information as one of the ways of following up the Symposium, in particular, the Austrian Government had agreed to include questions on language use, study and needs as part of their continuing census programme.

Mr. Richterich presented the results of the questionnaire on needs and motivations of adults learning a foreign language, which he had provisionally tested in the framework of the Neuchâtel and Lausanne Eurocentres. The questionnaire was generally agreed to have been successful in eliciting the special characteristics and motivations of Eurocentre students. As these were clearly untypical of adult language learners in general, it was proposed that the questionnaire should also be tested in the framework of the Volkshochschulverband, among those learners taking the VHS certificate in French, and perhaps in a British evening institute.

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A discussion then followed on various types, objectives and methods of enquiry into language use, needs and motivations. The group agreed that this question should be thoroughly examined at the St. Wolfgang Symposium. Meanwhile, Dr. Lowak suggested that the group should formulate clearly a set of questions to be included in a micro-census to be carried out this year by the Austrian Bureau of Statistics. For this purpose, it was agreed that members of the group would send to Mr. Richterich, without delay, their suggestions for the preparation of a list of questions which will then be sent (end of February) to Dr. Lowak for elaboration and refinement by an expert of the "Österreichisches Statistisches Zentralamt". The list will then be circulated for comment to members of the group before the next meeting.

5. Mr. Salin informed the participants of the objective and development of one of the TRUAS (1) projects aimed at producing a multi-media system for the teaching of English at an intermediate level. In view of the relevance that this Swedish project seems to have for the development of the units/credits system, it was decided to arrange for this scheme to be presented to the participants of the St. Wolfgang Symposium (including a demonstration of the audio-visual aids and accompanying teaching materials). A short text in English describing the organisational framework of the scheme and summarising the main conclusions drawn so far from this experiment should be made available to the Secretariat for distribution to the participants before the Symposium.

It was also suggested that Professor Trim, as Project Director, should make a visit to Sweden in order to study how the TRUAS system works in the schools where it is applied.

6. It was proposed that the next meeting of the group of experts should last three days (Strasbourg, 3 - 4 - 5 April 1973). The group, in fact, felt that a whole day would be necessary to discuss the interim report on the progress of work to be submitted by Dr. Bung. On the other two days the experts will (i) discuss the preliminary draft outline of the units/credits system to be prepared by the Project Director; (ii) finalise the programme of the St. Wolfgang Symposium; (iii) reconsider the phased plan of work (doc. CCC/EES (72) 6C, pages 8 - 11) in the light of the preliminary discussion on the further development of the project (cf. point B3).

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(1) Swedish Committee for Radio and Television in Education

ANNEXE I
APPENDIX I

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A P P E N D I X II

Summary of Approach to Threshold Level Specification

(Note submitted by Dr. Bung)

The research will be conducted in accordance with the general principles resulting from the discussion (cf. point B.2 of the report) and aims at the operational specification of language learning objectives with a view to "increasing motivations for language learning by adults and ... optimising provisions in language learning to meet the diversified ... needs of adult learners" (document CCC/EES (72) 60, p. 8).

The threshold level content will be specified in the form of "modules". In specifying each module at least three aspects will be considered:

1. Subject matter (i.e. a finite set of rules, including the relations between words and their meanings).

2. Standard (e.g. to be measured in terms of "performance index" corresponding to van Ek's "proportion of correct acts" (Ek, Analysis, p. 4, and Ek, Proposal, p. 78) and possibly in terms of other variables as well).

3. Need (an indication of the tasks the learner can carry out with, but not without, the skills specified in terms of "subject matter" and "standard").

Different modules need not be identical in "size" (i.e. in terms of average time required to acquire the corresponding skill). Each module must be large enough to satisfy a distinctive need and must be so small that no smaller module can be found to satisfy a distinctive need. The expected abilities of potential learners will be taken into consideration to ensure that a module can be mastered within a reasonable period of time (cf. the immediate needs of immigrant workers mentioned by Mr. Nowacek).

Some more complex needs may be assigned a <u>set</u> of modules of the type mentioned above.

Each module should be examinable on its own. Whether and how certain examination results in individual modules should be combined to be awarded a "credit" will be explored later. Some modules may be tackled without any

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prior knowledge of the target language while others may pre-suppose that certain different modules have previously been acquired. Sequential relations among modules will be indicated with a view to maximising the learner's and course writer's freedom of choice while, at the same time, preventing inefficient learning sequences (cf. Bung: "The concept of partial order in programmed language instruction and the freedom of the consumer". In PROGRAMMED LEARNING AND EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY, Vol. 8, p. 22-33 and 122-124. Sweet and Maxwell, London 1971).

For the specification of subject matter and standard, the existing studies by van Ek and Wilkins and the observations made by members of the group will be taken into consideration. For the specification of needs, the existing study by Richterich and the results of his questionnaire presented at Strasbourg will be used.